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DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Comments on Maria Panum Baastrup's: invitation systems and identification in Late Iron Age southern Scandinavia? The gold foil figures from a new perspective

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ABSTRACT

This commentary points out the importance of looking at apparently well-known archaeological material from new angles and highlights Maria Panum Baastrup's work of putting gold foil figures into a functional context as an inspiring example.

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Archaeology is not an exact science. But archaeology can clarify contexts and develop arguments where context is interpreted on the basis of empirical data and theory. And that is exactly what Maria Panum Baastrup does in her article, 'Invitation systems and identification in Late Iron Age southern Scandinavia? The gold foil figures from a new perspective.'

Gold foil figures, small and mostly rectangular plates or figurines of very thin sheets of gold, have been studied for several years and are an abundant source material with more than two thousand examples alone from the area around Sorte Muld on Bornholm (Watt 1999, p. 134). The research has been firmly grounded in empirical data while theories have been primarily driven by iconographical studies (such as Ratke 2010, Mannering 2012, Hedeager 2015). But it is as if the interpretation of the gold foil figures' both microscopic and complex imagery has, in several respects, overshadowed the interpretation of the function of the object. Therefore, the major strength of Baastrup's article is the new perspective, which she brings. Function is placed ahead of motif thereby making her reflections an inspiration not only for when working with gold foil figures, but also for any work involving antiquity's many other objects, which have a specific form, but also a form whose function we do not recognize and whose use, therefore, we cannot clearly contextualize (Lyngstrøm 2006, p. 56f). Once the perspective changes, the contexts of the source material can also be expanded.

Gold foil figures are almost exclusively found at late Iron Age assembly sites – not in the graves, not on ordinary farms and not around the countryside. Their function must, therefore, have had a clear relation to the assembly site and to the actions, which took place therein. But gold foil figures are tiny, weighing about 0.1 g and are too delicate to withstand regular handling. Moreover, in a society in which the higher echelons had massive gold rings weighing several hundred grams, the precious metal value of the gold foil figures cannot have been high in an economic sense. And neither were they jewellery. Only a very small portion of them are reinforced with a plate and eyelet and only few are worn around the edges (Watt 1999, p. 140 & Abb. 12,9d). On the face of it, gold foil figures do not seem to have had a practical function and, therefore, their archaeology has been to perceive them as small offerings – somewhat like lit candles in front of icons and statues of saints in today's churches.

But Baastrup, who has previously achieved significant results through her work on network analysis based on imported finds of the Viking Age (Baastrup 2009), has shifted the focus from the motifs of the gold foil figures to their function, and she argues convincingly that this was a primarily social function within intellectual network of the late Iron Age. She draws this idea from examples such as the terracotta tokens that served as invitations or entry tickets for rituals and celebrations in the Temple of Bel in Palmyria, Syria (Baastrup 2016, Fig. 3a-b). An analogy that is not based on it being a tradition that has spread but rather

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on an assumption that the need for identification and control of access is universal and that that is crucial in relation to forming an understanding of the activities, which occurred at those late Iron Age assembly sites, where spatial organization through architecture and fences clearly shows that concepts such as control and regulation were emphasized.

Following Baastrup's argument, the production and subsequent distribution of gold foil figures are key, because as a potential form of 'bearer-identity' control also becomes a keyword. The interpretation presupposes a supervised production and distribution, because once you possess a gold foil figure, it gives access to the innermost social circles of the assembly sites. If we assume that the required amount gold was more or less easily accessible to the elite workshops, then it is the die which is of significance. It is that and the use of that, which was to be supervised as long as its motif was valid. When the gathering was held, the motif may have lost validity, and perhaps it is this non-validity that we are seeing in the bent or cut gold foil figures of the assembly sites (Ratke 2010, Fig. 25).

The fact that gold foil figures are different in relation to how their motifs are constructed and how their gold plates are cut in relation to the motif must be brought in here. For even if there are large groups of relatively similar and apparently systematically produced gold foil figures, there are also several, which have a different motif and one of a more sketchy quality (Watt 1999, Abb 12,8 & 9b, Baastrup 2016, Fig. 6). Here the artist has not applied a die, but has incised the motif or cut it out. His knowledge may have been greater than his ability. For although the artist – unlike us – may have known the function of the object he was making, in principle, he has not been able to produce an infinite number of identical identification tags. Maybe he is imitating the phenomenon from the possibilities available to him. Baastrup also points out, quite correctly, that not all gold foil figures necessarily have to have had the same function.

The production of gold foil figures required access to and control of material, tools, and skills. The use of gold foil figures required a knowledge and acceptance of the underlying mechanisms. Baastrup makes it clear that knowledge was known in the intellectual network within the late Iron Age. And it is that network, which she helps us to see the contours of the relationship between the era's most powerful women and men. Maybe they did not speak the same language or know each other's faces when they met and identified themselves at Sorte Muld, Toftegård, Uppåkra, and Lundeborg. Therefore, the gold foil figures were essential.

Baastrup's ideas are an inspiring contribution to the very important discussion of the intellectual network of the late Iron Age. And as she herself – with the title's question mark – stresses: the results of her argument are neither true nor false. But she makes convincingly clear that in the late Iron Age's environments means to identify and legitimize themselves in certain contexts where necessary. Thus, the science of archaeology has gained a brand new tool for its toolbox for when we try to put the gold foil figures into a functional context in the future.

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